

METHOD AND APPARATUS TO PREVENT REVERSE ENGINEERING AND TAMPERING

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

5 The present invention relates to methods and apparatus that can prevent, resist, or deter reverse engineering and tampering with information such as computer software or data files during both the static and dynamic states of its presence on a system.

Background of the Invention

10 Most computer software and data found on commercially available general purpose operating systems are exposed to a threat of being reverse engineered or tampered with using widely available disassembling, de-compiling, debugging, and in-circuit emulating utilities. Despite the employment of cryptographic algorithms, hardware dangles, and software encryption, software and data remain vulnerable to security attacks. Such vulnerability exists regardless whether the software and data are present on a computer system in a static state (such as on a hard drive or other non-volatile storage media) or a dynamic state (such as in residence in a cache memory or main memory).

15 For example, by taking advantage of the appropriate utilities, an attacker skilled in the art of computer security or security cracking can observe and re-assemble the instructions of a software program by tracing their execution image in memory. The attacker can further monitor and/or alter a software program's secret operations such as its interactions with physical components of a computer. The attacker can also de-compile and analyze compiled code in the static state and then alter critical sections of the compiled code to compromise security.

20 To increase the difficulty for an attacker to observe, understand, or modify source code, companies such as Intel and Intertrust have introduced elaborate schemes of transformation or slicing of source code. The potential pitfall of these protection schemes is that they rely on the ingenuity of their designers. Attackers on the other hand similarly rely on their ingenuity to reverse engineer a protector's design. Thus, the effectiveness of the

protection system becomes an ingenuity contest between the protector and the attacker. Unfortunately, this fails to provide a scientific measure of how easy or how difficult it is for the ingenious protection mechanisms to be broken.

For these and related reasons, we assume that (1) all compiled code and data files are observable given the availability of commercial hardware and software utilities; (2) all elaborate schemes can be reverse engineered by ingenuity; and (3) attackers know the design of security schemes every bit as well as the designers. We believe the security of a protection system should be predictable and measurable. The most appropriate and reliable measure is probably the computation time and cost required to crack the protection system. In particular, true security lies in a predictable, large work factor for attackers. Such work factor should be large enough to make it humanly impossible to comprehend the protected source code and data files, and exponentially time consuming and expensive for computers to do so.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention protects computer software by adding to the software large numbers of obscuring instructions selected from an obscuring code bank. Preferably, the obscuring instructions selected from the obscuring code bank are made to resemble the computer code that is obscured to achieve uniqueness of obscuration at each installation. Such obscuration can be achieved through embodiments both at the source code level and the object code level although different apparatus may need to be employed.

Preferably, the obscuring instructions are generated in functional groupings called "blocks". Advantageously, at least some of the blocks of obscuring instructions are formed from other blocks by a transformational relationship. Specifically, for any two successive blocks, C_1 and C_2 , that have a transformational relationship, the instructions in C_2 can be determined and generated by performing a mathematical transformation T on number codes associated with the instructions in C_1 . And, in general, any block C_N is generated by a series of mathematical transformations T such that $C_N = T_N(T_{N-1}(...(T_3(T_2(C_1)))...))$ where C_1 is an initial block of obscuring instructions selected from the obscuring code bank. Conversely, instructions in C_1 can be determined and generated by performing the inverse mathematical transformation on number codes associated with the instructions in C_2 . Advantageously, different mathematical transformations are used between different pairs of successive blocks

and the transformations are randomly selected so as to achieve uniqueness for each set of obscuring instructions that is generated.

To enhance security, the obscured object code is encrypted and stored in the form of superblocks of concatenated blocks of code. Consequently, each block of code in a superblock can be decrypted only if the blocks of code that precede it in the superblock have previously been decrypted. This results in an obscured package of code that is resistant to analysis of the statically stored code or to any tampering while in the static state.

Advantageously, the obscured object code may also be compressed to remove some of the redundancy arising from the use of mathematical transformations to generate some of the obscuring code blocks.

In the present invention, the obscured code package is loaded into a computer's real memory block by block. A run time apparatus is employed to decrypt/decompress and generate the obscured instructions of each block starting with C_1 . The generated instructions of each block are loaded into memory by this apparatus at a dynamically determined address that is unique for each block. After loading the block, the run time apparatus switches control to the instruction block for execution. When execution of each block is completed, control is switched back to the run time apparatus to load the next block. The process continues until instructions in all the blocks are executed. The dynamic loading and execution of each block makes it virtually impossible to trace instructions that are only generated and executed in real time.

A preferred method of operating the invention to protect a sequence of computer code comprises the steps of: preparing simple obscuring instructions that are comprehensible yet require considerably more time to read and understand; injecting a large number of obscuring instructions into the sequence of computer code in an automated process to produce an obscured sequence of computer instructions that in total is humanly impossible to read and understand; compressing and/or encrypting a static image of the obscured sequence to protect against direct decompilation; and executing the obscured instructions one instruction at a time, thereby making run time trace and observation a labor intensive manual process. Preferably, the method provides a computational work factor that is exponential at least on the scale of N^3 where N is the number of obscured instructions and potentially may be as much as $e^{N \log N}$. For example, for 10,000,000 obscured instructions, it can be expected that it would take over 250,000 years on a modern PC (e.g., 500 MHZ clock rate) to locate and reverse engineer the protected sequence of computer code.

In similar fashion, the present invention also protects data files by adding to the data large numbers of obscuring data selected from an obscuring data bank. Blocks of obscuring data can also be generated that are related to each other by a mathematical transformation. The transformation can be performed either on the data itself or on number codes associated with each item of obscuring data.

To enhance security, the obscured data may likewise be encrypted and/or compressed. This may be done as part of the same process that encrypts and/or compresses the obscured object code or it may be done separately.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

These and other objects, features and advantages of the invention will be more readily apparent from the following detailed description in which:

Fig. 1 describes a first part of the apparatus of the present invention.

Fig. 2 describes a second part of the apparatus of the present invention.

Fig. 3 describes a third part of the apparatus of the present invention.

Fig. 4 describes a fourth part of the apparatus of the present invention.

Fig. 5 illustrates the content of a data file used for run time decryption.

Fig. 6 illustrates the structure of run time components of the system in reference to a computer's execution environment.

Fig. 7 describes the process of loading and executing the first block of obscured code segments and the loading of data for the first N blocks.

Fig. 8 describes the process of loading and executing the second obscured code block and transfer of control from second block to the third block.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

In Fig. 1, a pre-processor 102 parses source code 101 to generate serialized code blocks 104 and a critical function profile 106. This process is completed on the source code level at pre-compile time. Source code 101 is typically the source code used in critical functions, such as the most crucial part to the overall security of a computer program, or source code that contains the most essential implementation details in realizing certain valuable design and other trade secrets. The present invention is primarily to protect the

critical function source code from being identified, observed, traced for execution or modified (often referred to as "patched"). Source code 101 is considered serialized in the present invention when all subroutine calls in source code 101 have been fully expanded into sequentially listed instructions in one self-contained body function/subroutine. By transforming source code 101 into the serialized code blocks 104, source code 101 is prepared for injecting obscuring code in later stage processes of the present invention.

Pre-processor 102 uses a user defined security strength 103 as an input parameter in determining the number of lines of code to be generated in each code block 104 and the total number of code blocks 104. For the highest level of security strength 103, each code block 104 will contain at most only one line of source code 101 or one instruction, and the total number of code blocks 104 is equal to or greater than the number of lines of source code in the critical function source code 101. For the lowest level of security strength 103, there could be only one code block 104 that may contain all the original source code 101 within the single block. For other levels of security strength 103, the pre-processor 102 may randomly set a number of code blocks, *NC*, and randomly determine the number of instructions, *NI*, in each code block 104.

Pre-processor 102 also generates a data set called critical function profile 106 that describes the nature of the source code contained in the critical function source code. Profile 106 is understandable to other components of the present invention and is utilized for selecting obscuring code that "looks" similar to make it difficult for an attacker to distinguish the original critical function source code 101 and the obscuring code that is injected later.

As an example of obscuring a simple instruction in a function, consider a simple C program segment where the critical operation instruction is "V1 = 1024":

```
Function1 (...) {  
    ...  
    Int V1; //declare the variable as integer type  
    V1 = 1024; //Assign value to V1  
    ...  
    Return V1; // return the value of V1  
}
```

The objective here is to obscure the assignment operation V1=1024, which is simple and straight forward and will not take more than a few seconds for a person skilled at the art to understand. However, by simply injecting some obscuring code, the obscured code will be significantly more time consuming to read and comprehend. The obscuring code selected may include a number of assignment instructions and some simple calculation instructions.

```
ObsFunction1 ( ... ){  
  Int V1, V2, V3, V4;  
  
  ...  
  V1 = 1024;  
  V1 = V1 + 1024;  
  V2 = 1024;  
  V2 = V2 + 1024;  
  V3 = V2;  
  V3 = V3 - V2;  
  V4 = 1024;  
  V4 = V4 + 1024;  
  V4 = V4 - V4  
  V2 = V2 - 1024;  
  V1 = V1 - 1024;  
  V2 = V2 - 1024;  
  V1 = V1 + V2 + V3 + V4;  
  ...  
  Return V1;  
}
```

With the added obscuring instructions, it is still possible to isolate V1 out of V2, V3, and V4. However, now it will take a few minutes before a skilled person can read and identify the original critical instruction "V1=1024". The complexity of this example increases enormously when the original critical instructions are composed of 10 to 20 lines of instructions, these instructions are mixed with obscuring instructions on the order of

millions including both instructions that are similar to the instructions to be protected and instructions that are dissimilar, and the critical instructions are randomly spread across many blocks. In fact, it becomes so time consuming to read and comprehend the obscured output that it will become humanly impossible. For example, consider the difficulties involved in interpreting a sequence of code if, instead of four values V1, V2, V3 and V4, the code included 100,000 values, returned all 100,000 values and there was no indication of which value or values had any significance.

Fig. 2 depicts an obscuring code generator 203 and two predefined code banks: an obscuring code bank 204 and a transformation function bank 205. In Fig. 2, obscuring code generator 203 generates obscuring code blocks 206 that are used to protect the critical function source code 101. Illustratively, the available storage size is one million lines of code, the size of each block 206 is 125 lines of code, and there are 8000 blocks of code. Obscuring code generator 203 uses the critical function profile 106, security strength 103, storage size 201, and execution time 202 as input parameters for generating obscuring code from the two predefined code banks.

Obscuring code bank 204 is a database that contains program instructions previously created through a manual, automated, or a combination of manual and automated process. Associated with each instruction is a unique numeric code. Thus, each numeric code identifies an obscuring instruction and the entire set of numeric codes identifies the entire set of obscuring instructions. Advantageously, each numeric code may simply be the memory address at which the instruction is stored in the obscuring code bank. Each code block 206 is a subset of the obscuring instructions available in obscuring code bank 204 and the instructions in block 206 can be identified by the numeric codes associated with those instructions.

The program instructions in bank 204 comprise a large pool of instructions that are often built upon expertise and experience of the database designers. A large number of them resemble the most frequently used instructions in commonly used programming languages although a significant portion of them are purely random code without predefined profile. As indicated in the example given above, obscuring code may perform a function (e.g., returning the value $V1 = 1024$) that is useful to the critical function code to be protected but do so in a way that is very inefficient. Indeed, it may be spectacularly inefficient. Alternatively, as suggested by operations such as $V4 = V4 - V4$, the code may be functional but may do nothing more than perform an operation and later perform the inverse

of the operation so as to produce no effect other than obscuring the code to be protected. Other examples of obscuring code may have nothing do with the operation of the code to be protected but will still have to be deciphered because an attacker will not know which code is relevant and which is not.

The presence of the obscuring instructions injected into the critical function source code has a direct impact on any attacker's ability to understand or modify the correct instructions in order to compromise the system's integrity. As an example, a segment of 10 lines of instructions that performs certain essential functions of a software application is serialized, distributed into multiple code blocks and mixed with 1,000,000 lines of obscuring code instructions. Using modern day microcomputers, one can assume that the typical CPU clock speed is beyond 500 MHZ. At such speeds, it takes a microcomputer no more than 8 milliseconds to execute all 1,000,000+ instruction provided the instructions perform relatively simply calculations, assignments and minimal I/Os. While the computational overhead is relatively low, the job for an attacker to understand and modify the key parts of these instructions is an insurmountable task. Even though the task of obtaining and observing the instructions is already difficult, let's assume an attacker can capture all 1,000,000 plus instructions and can observe and analyze them. This number of instructions amounts to 16,667 pages of printout on regular letter sized paper. Assuming the attacker can read at the speed of 3 minutes per page and work for an average of 8 hours a day, it will take him over 100 days just to finish reading the content in order to reach a shallow understanding of the instructions. As a practical matter, careful examination and much more time will ordinarily be required to identify the original 10 lines of critical instruction out of the 1,000,000 obscuring instructions.

Furthermore, if a certain set of instructions is of even higher importance in a software application, more obscuring instructions can be injected. Consider the example of injecting 10,000,000 obscuring instructions. A modern computer can process these instructions within 80 milliseconds. However, the attacker will be challenged with a total of 166,667 pages of printout, and over three years just to finish reading them casually. The challenge is practically equivalent to finding a small needle in the Atlantic Ocean, which is humanly impossible to do.

Current and future advances in computer microprocessor are rapidly accelerating. Today, CPUs that work at one GHz have been announced and CPUs that work at over 500 MHZ are commonplace. The faster a CPU can process instructions, the more obscuring

transformations. Advantageously, each numeric code may simply be the memory address at which the instruction is stored in the transformation code bank. Preferably, Sets A and B are sets of numeric codes and the transformation T satisfies the following relationships:

5
$$B = T(A)$$

and

$$A = T'(B)$$

where T' is the mathematical inverse function of T. Examples of T might be increment the value of A by 10 or multiply the value of A by 3; and the corresponding inverse functions would be decrement the value of B by 10 and divide the value of B by 3.

Obscuring code generator 203 applies the transformations obtained from the transformation function bank 205 to the numeric codes associated with the obscuring instructions obtained from the obscuring code bank 204 to produce more obscuring instructions. In particular, generator 203 produces blocks of obscuring code 206. The first of these blocks is generated by generator 203 by selecting obscuring instructions from code bank 204. Additional blocks are generated by selecting transformations 210 from transformation function bank 205, applying these transformations to the numeric codes associated with the obscuring instructions found in a previously generated block of obscuring instructions so as to generate a set of transformed numeric codes and forming new blocks 206 of obscuring instructions using the instructions identified by the transformed numeric codes. Preferably, the transformations are selected randomly. The selected transformation functions are represented by elements 208 in Fig. 2 and their inverses by elements 211.

In the event a transformation generates a numeric code that is outside the range of numeric codes, the generated numeric code "wraps around" as in modulus arithmetic so as to generate a numeric code that is within range.

In the embodiment of the invention shown in Fig. 2, the transformations are concatenated so that any block C_N is generated by a series of mathematical transformations T such that $C_N = T_N(T_{N-1}(\dots(T_3(T_2(C_1))))))$, where C_1 is an initial block of obscuring instructions selected from the obscuring code bank. By concatenating the transformations, it is possible to generate an enormous number of different transformations while storing only relatively few transformations in the transformation function bank 205. Alternatively,

a

each block can be generated from the first block of obscuring instructions using a single transformation function instead of the concatenated set of functions.

5 The use of transformations to generate additional blocks of obscuring instructions makes it possible to generate enormous numbers of additional obscuring instructions while allowing the system to compress and encrypt these instructions. To someone trying to understand the instructions, a block of instructions generated by a transformation of associated numeric codes can be every bit as difficult to understand as the original block of instructions. However, the transformed block can be represented simply by the transformation which can be represented by its numeric address in the transformation code bank. Thus, while it would require 125 numeric codes associated with instructions in code bank 204 to represent a first block of 125 obscuring instructions, a single numeric code associated with a transformation in function bank 205 can be used to generate from the first code block another 125 numeric codes associated with instructions in code bank 204 to represent a second block of 125 obscuring instructions and so on for additional blocks of obscuring instructions. Moreover, if the correspondences between the numeric codes and the obscuring instructions and the numeric codes and the transformation functions can be kept secret, the instructions may also be encrypted.

15 It should be noted, however, that there are also computational costs involved in generating the additional blocks of code using the transformations. As a result, a typical practice is for generator 203 to produce several different blocks of obscuring code by selecting instructions from code bank 204 and then generate from each of these blocks of obscuring code several additional blocks of obscuring instructions by selecting transformations 210 from the transformation function bank 205.

20 The composition of the first code block, the number of code blocks, the size of each code block, the number of obscuring instructions per line of code to be obscured, and the compression ratio to be maintained are determined by generator 203 from the critical function profile 106, security strength 103, storage size 201 and execution time 202.

25 Fig. 3 depicts an obscuring code injector 301, run time apparatus 302 and an obscuration compiler 308. In Fig. 3, obscuring code injector 301 combines the serialized code blocks 104 and obscuring code blocks 206 with run time apparatus 302 to create a pre-compilation obscured image 307. Obscuration compiler 308 uses the pre-compilation program image 307 as input to create an obscured object level image 312.

Run time apparatus 302 comprises the necessary programming instructions to load blocks of machine level code into a computer's memory for execution and to transfer execution control from one code block to another. A code locator 303 locates one or more blocks of programming instruction from a data file that will be described later in Fig. 6. A decryptor 304 decrypts the code block located by the code locator 303 into plain text machine level code in preparation for execution. A code loader 305 loads the decrypted code block into memory and starts the actual execution of the instructions. A control handler 306 hands over control of execution from the current code block to the next one in queue as soon as the current code block's execution is finished.

Obscuring code injector 301 injects the run time apparatus 302 comprising elements 303, 304, 305, and 306 into the serialized critical function source code blocks 104 and the obscuring code blocks 206 to minimize the possibility for the serialized critical function source code to be observed. As a result, image 307 comprises multiple collections of blocks 302, 104, and 207. At this stage, the pre-compilation obscured image 307 is ready to be compiled into object code. The obscuration compiler 308 is applied to pre-compilation obscured image 307 to create object level code blocks 309, 310, and 311 in correspondence to blocks 302, 104, and 206. Each collections of a block 309, block 310, and block 311 is referred to as an object level block O_i 312.

Obscuration compiler 308 is a special purpose apparatus that augments a regular compiler by preserving the transformation constraints. With a regular compiler, the transformation function T for adjacent obscuring code blocks 206 would be lost once the source code is compiled into object level code using a regular compiler. However, obscuration compiler 308 implements the processing logic to preserve such transformation function even after object level code is created for the source code. Specifically, if the functional constraint exists between block C_1 206 and block C_2 206 and can be defined as follows (same as in Fig. 2):

$$C_2 = T_2(C_1)$$

and

$$C_1 = T_2'(C_2)$$

where T_2 and T_2' are transformation functions and inverse transformation functions for C_1 and C_2 , then, the obscuration compiler ensures that the corresponding object level code blocks O_{C1} 311 and O_{C2} 311 satisfy the following constraints:

$$O_{C2} = T_2(O_{C1})$$

and

$$O_{C1} = T_2'(O_{C2}).$$

has a3 ~~The implementation of a compiler that preserves the transportation information in this way will be known to those skilled in the art. By so preserving the transformation information, the transformation functions can be applied to the object level code to achieve compression, if desired.~~

In Fig. 4, an encryption processor 401 takes object level blocks 312 as input, and encrypts them in a recursive chain fashion. The encryption process is applied to all object level code blocks 312 starting with O_N which includes blocks O_{LN} 309, O_{EN} 310, and O_{CN} 311 and ending with O_2 which includes blocks O_{L2} 309, O_{E2} 310, and O_{C2} 311. The process is not applied to object code block O_1 which includes blocks O_{L1} , O_{E1} , and O_{C1} . The output of each stage i of encryption processor 401 is D_i 402. The output of each stage except stage 2 is applied as an input to the encryption processor of the next stage.

In general, each encryption processor P_i scrambles and thereby encrypts object level code block O_i 312 and the output of D_{i+1} of the previous processor in accordance with an algorithm specified by a key. Advantageously, a different scrambling algorithm is used for each encryption processor P_i and the key that specifies the algorithm is inserted in clear text in the output D_i . This encryption process ensures that the output data file is encrypted and can not be directly de-compiled statically. Because the blocks are encrypted as they are compressed, attackers cannot directly decompile the data files to obtain the entire obscuring and critical function instructions. These characteristics force attackers to trace the execution of the system in this invention during run time as the only feasible means to observe the obscuring instructions.

Fig. 5 illustrates the data file constructed at the end of the obscuring process. The final data file contains essentially O_{L1} 309, O_{E1} 310, O_{C1} 311 and D_2 . D_2 in turn contains the scrambled form of D_3 , and D_3 contains D_4 , so on and so forth. Code blocks obscured in this fashion are protected against any direct de-compilation or disassembling attempts, because

the contents of the data file are no longer recognizable for utilities that do not understand the specific format and de-compression process.

Because the number of obscuring instructions can be in the millions, it is also desirable to incorporate data compression technology in the encryption processors 401. In the case where blocks of obscuring code are generated by mathematical transformations from a first block of obscuring code generated from obscuring code bank 204, substantial compression can be achieved simply by representing each block in terms of the first block of obscuring code and the numerical codes representing the transformations used to generate the block. Since obstruction compiler 308 ensures that the object level code that represents the obscuring instructions is related by just such a series of transformations, such compression is achievable by replacing the object level code blocks O_{Ci} 311 with the transformations that are used to generate these blocks. In addition, the numeric codes that identify these transformations can readily be scrambled and thereby encrypted at the same time as the encryption processor scrambles and encrypts object level code blocks O_{Li} 309 and O_{Ei} 310.

In particular, in a preferred embodiment of the invention that both encrypts and compresses the object level code, encryption processor P_N 401 scrambles O_{LN} 309 and O_{EN} 310 and the numeric code representing transformation T_N in accordance with an algorithm specified by a key N . These scrambled values and the clear text value of the key N constitute output D_N 402. Compression is achieved by representing O_{CN} 311 in terms of the scrambled numeric code representing transformation T_N .

Subsequently, D_N 402, a numeric code representing transformation T_{N-1} , a key $N-1$ and the next set of object level code blocks O_{N-1} are used as inputs for encryption processor P_{N-1} 401. At this step, encryption processor P_{N-1} 401 scrambles O_{LN-1} 309, O_{EN-1} 310 and D_N 402, and a numeric code representing transformation T_{N-1} . These scrambled values and the clear text value of key $N-1$ constitute output D_{N-1} 402. Again, compression is achieved by representing O_{CN-1} 311 in terms of the scrambled numeric code representing transformation T_{N-1} .

The compression and scrambling process continues for all the object level code blocks in 312 in the same fashion for sequence number $N-2$, $N-3$, $N-4$... except for O_{Li} 309, O_{Ei} 310, and O_{Ci} 311.

Once the process is complete, O_{Li} 309 can retrieve key₂ so as to de-scramble D_2 402 at runtime to retrieve T_2 , O_{L2} 309, O_{E2} 311 and D_3 ; and O_{C2} 311 can be recreated using O_{Ci}

311 and the unscrambled numeric code for transformation T_2 . However, until D_2 is descrambled and O_{L2} is executed, D_3 remains undistinguishable. And similarly, until D_3 is descrambled and O_{L3} is executed, D_4 remains undistinguishable; and so on. Such constructs ensure that all the code blocks are only observable when the scrambled data blocks O_{L1} , D_2 , D_3, \dots, D_{N-1} and D_N are scrambled and executed at runtime.

Fig. 6 depicts a typical microcomputer system architecture and the execution model of the run time apparatus of the present invention. A data file 602 is stored on the computer's hard disk 601. The data file is loaded into the computer's real memory 603 at run time through the computer's main bus system 604. The actual memory space required to execute the code blocks contained in the data file is allocated separately and is illustrated at 605.

Fig. 7 illustrates how the run time execution process starts with the first set of code blocks being loaded into memory and executed.

15 ~~All executions of the code blocks are conducted within the memory address space indicated as 605. As the first step, O_{L1} 701 is loaded at memory address L_1 711. This address will remain unchanged for all future $O_{L2}, \dots, O_{LN-1}, O_{LN}$ code blocks. CodeLoader 702 of O_{L1} executes within this space to allocate a dynamic memory location at address E_1 710. It is important that address E_1 710 be dynamically assigned to ensure that the execution process of the code blocks can not be automatically traced at a fixed address using conventional or commercially available tools. Because of the dynamic nature of this address allocation, address E_2 for the next set of code blocks O_{L2} can not be determined until the active instructions of O_{L1} de-scramble O_{L2} .~~

25 At address E_1 , the runtime image of a series of code blocks is loaded and executed, including O_{E1} 704, O_{C1} 705, Get(key₂) 706, Decrypt (O_{L2}) 707, Load (O_{L2}) 708, and "Jump To Address L" 709. O_{E1} 704 and O_{C1} 705 are the mixed instruction blocks that contain both the original instructions in critical function source code 101 and the obscuring instructions for the first code block. The execution of instruction blocks 704 and 705 is the most essential action at this stage.

30 Get(key₂) 706 is the instructions that retrieves the encryption key₂ so that O_{L2} can be decrypted and loaded into Address L. Decrypt(O_{L2}) 707 is the set of instructions that actually decrypts and creates the executable O_{L2} code blocks. "Load (O_{L2}) at Address L" 708 loads the decrypted O_{L2} instructions into the static memory address L 711 ready for the next step of processing. "Jump to L" 709 hands the control of execution to the instructions

loaded at address L 711. At this stage, the essential functionality has been completed for step one and the system is ready to load and execute the next set of code blocks O_{L2} 309, O_{E2} 310, and O_{C2} 311.

5 In Fig. 8, O_{L2} 801 has been decrypted and loaded into the static memory address L 711. A code locator 802 locates the compressed and scrambled code for O_{E2} 807 and O_{C2} 808 from the .DAT data file cache 606 and retrieves them for decryption and decompression. Decryptor 803 executes the actual decryption and decompression of the retrieved code blocks. A code loader 804 dynamically determines a memory address E_2 806, allocates the necessary space, and loads the decrypted code blocks into it for execution. A control handler 805 transfers control of execution to the instructions loaded at E_2 806.

10 O_{E2} 807 and O_{C2} 808 contain the true instructions within the original critical function source code 101 and the obscuring code blocks. They are first executed as the most essential functionality of this step. Subsequent code segments 809, 810, and 811 are similar to the apparatus described in Fig. 7, and are executed to retrieve O_{L3} , load O_{L3} into the static memory space at address L, then transfer execution control over to the instructions in that memory space.

15 The execution of subsequent sets of code blocks, O_{L4} 309, O_{E4} 310, O_{C4} 311, O_{L5} 309, O_{E5} 310, O_{C5} 311, ..., follow the same process as described above until all code blocks are loaded in memory and executed.

20 Because the run time apparatus in this invention allows dynamic loading and execution of the blocks in data file, virtually an arbitrary number of obscuring instructions can be executed as long as execution overhead limit permits. Furthermore, because every block of instruction is executed at a dynamically assigned memory address, it makes tracing execution of these blocks a challenging task. Without highly specialized hardware devices, locating the address where a block of instructions is loaded in memory is virtually impossible. These characteristics of the runtime system ensure that obtaining and observing instructions in memory using tracing techniques are laborious and time consuming to the extent of being humanly impossible without the support of highly expensive and specially designed hardware devices.

25 The method and system described in the present invention can be applied to any digital material that includes an executable component. Whenever a software application includes implementation of highly valuable technology or other trade secrets, respective programming instructions can take advantage of the obscuring capability of the current

invention. For computer security related products, the present invention offers these products robust anti-trace and anti-decompilation protection for programming instructions that are most vulnerable and critical in the products.

5 Additionally, an embodiment of the present invention can enable different sets of obscuring programming instructions to be injected for each different protected product, user desktop computer, or user identification. High performance back end server systems can be optimized to extract obscuring instructions from the obscuring code bank specifically and differently according to the input of a machine id, user id, or other uniquely identifying parameters. Such capability to prevent any potential compromise of security can be
10 generically applied to other products, customers, or machines. It can ensure the same amount of computational resource is required to crack each product or machine across a product line or customer line.

As indicated, in the same fashion as the invention is used to protect critical software, the invention may also be applied to the protection of critical data by hiding the critical data amid vast quantities of obscuring data generated from an obscuring data bank. Additional quantities of obscuring data may also be generated by transforming the obscuring data using a transformation function bank. The obscured data may likewise be encrypted and/or compressed either as part of the same process that encrypts and/or compresses the software or independently thereof.
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20 In conclusion, the present invention makes it possible to protect critical programming instructions and/or data by injecting a large amount of obscuring instructions and/or data to the extent that observing and understanding of the obscured instructions and/or data is not humanly feasible. The apparatus and system of the present invention facilitates compression of obscuring instruction and/or data and the runtime execution of the obscuring instructions and/or data so that neither direct de-compilation nor real time tracing
25 of the obscuring instructions and/or data can be achieved without the use of extensive and expensive computing resources only affordable by large organizations over an extraordinary time span.

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